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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001540

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SUBJECT: DISCUSSIONS CONTINUE ON GOVERNMENT POSITIONS

REF: BAGHDAD 1484

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert S. Ford for
reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) Summary. The day before PM-designate al-Maliki's May 9 target date for announcement of the new government, debate among and within political blocs continued over key positions. Tawafuq appears to have settled on Agriculture specialist (and Adnan al-Dulaimi ally) Salam Zakam al-Zuba'i as its candidate for a DPM position. However, Tawafuq, National Dialogue Front (Hewar) and Iraqiyya continue to negotiate amongst themselves on the division of ministries and names of candidates. Capitalizing on Shia unhappiness with Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari's stewardship, Salih Mutlak is conducting a full court press to secure the bid for Foreign Minister. However, there is no indication that the Kurds are prepared to give up this position. Within the Shia coalition, the Fadhila party continues to fight to retain control of the Ministry of Oil. As expected, it is unlikely that Maliki will reach his self-imposed May 9 deadline. That said, we do see gradual progress towards completion of the cabinet. End Summary.

Tawafuq/Iraqiya/Hewar Agreement Still Outstanding

¶2. (C) An agreement between Tawafuq, Iraqiya and Hewar on specific division of posts has not yet been reached though negotiations continue. IIP's Ala Mekki reported to Poloff May 8 that Tawafuq appears to have settled on proposing Salam Zakam al-Zuba'i for a Deputy Prime Minister slot. Zuba'i is a member of Adnan Dulaymi's Gathering of the Iraqi People. If Zuba'i gets the deputy prime ministership, this would set the stage for Ayad Allawi to accept the post of Secretary General of the National Policy Council. However, Iraqiyya and Tawafuq have not yet reached agreement on the division of other ministries among themselves. Iraqiyya's Saad al-Janabi told Poloff on May 8 that Allawi will propose candidates for the ministries of Defense, Communication, Trade, Culture, Government and Youth and Sports. Allawi may also propose Adnan al-Janabi as a candidate for Foreign Minister should an independent Arab Sunni be sought for the position. (Note: Such a nomination could falter as Janabi was disqualified from the CoR by the De-Ba'thification Committee. End note.)

¶3. (C) Hewar's Saleh Mutlak continues to publicly insist on either the Deputy PM slot or the Foreign Affairs Ministry for himself, neither of which are likely. He told Poloff on May 8 that an independent Sunni Arab should lead the Foreign Ministry and claimed that he is the ideal candidate. He asserted that PM-designee Nuri al-Maliki had told him that he would not object to his nomination and would like to see a Sunni Arab in the Foreign Ministry slot. Mutlak also claimed that Tawafuq leaders Adnan al-

Dulaymi, Tariq al-Hashimi and Sheykh Khalaf Alayan back his bid. Poloff asked if these private expressions of support are serious and if Mutlak's bid for this top policy position was not irreparably damaged by his often inflammatory public statements. Mutlak conceded that support may not be firm but said the position is a red line for him and he would accept nothing less. (Note: We continue to believe that Mutlak will be willing to accept a lesser ministry rather than to go into opposition. End note.) Mutlak also expressed interest in the ministries of Agriculture, Trade, and Electricity along with the leadership of the Commission on Public Integrity.

New Guy in the Bloc

¶4. (C) In a May 7 meeting with PolOff, Fadhila party spokesperson Basim Sherif Nasif al-Hechaimi and Hassan Halbos al-Shemmari, a well-connected Fadhila parliamentarian, admitted that even though the Shia Coalition has yet to decide which ministry will go to which Shia coalition political party, Fadhila still expects to retain the Ministry of Oil (MoO). Shemmeri informed PolOffs that Acting Oil Minister Hashim al-Hashimi is not Fadhila's top choice for Minister of Oil; instead, it is Hussein Suleiman Mohamed. (Mohammed is a 34 year old engineer employed at the Oil Ministry who works for al-Hashimi.) Shemmeri insisted that Mohammed is firmly under Fadhila's control but would be open to technical assistance from the US oil experts. Shemmeri provided PolOffs with a copy of Mohammed's resume and college transcript and offered PolOffs full biographies on technical advisors they have contacted to "surround" Mohammed. He briefly outlined

BAGHDAD 00001540 002 OF 002

Fadhila's plans to increase oil production and proposed oil legislation to regulate foreign investment.

Corruption not our fault

¶5. (C) Shemmeri explained that the Fadhila party inherited MoO Ibrahim Bahr al-'Ulum and should not be blamed for his mismanagement of the Ministry. Hechaimi reminded PolOffs that soon after they discovered pervasive administrative corruption, they were quick to remove him from office. Shemmeri pointed out that the constitution stipulates that a replacement minister must be of minister or deputy minister rank. This limited Fadhila's choices, so it decided to pluck Hashim al-Hashimi from the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and place him in the MoO slot. Shemmari emphasized that Fadhila was against corruption in the Ministry, had fought it and was entirely within its rights to claim the Oil Ministry again.

¶6. (C) Al-Shemmeri said he was confident that a deal could be made to get Hussein Shahrastani, Maliki's favored Oil Minister candidate, to keep MoO in Fadhila hands. Echoing other Fadhila contacts (see septel), Shemmeri accused the Embassy of unfairly backing Iraqi Interim Government Oil Minister Thamer Ghadban for the position. PolOff replied that the U.S. would prefer that a competent, experienced, candidate be chosen. On May 8, newly appointed Fadhila deputy General Secretary Ali al-Dabbagh told PolOff that he was trying to persuade the rest of the party leadership to back Thamer Ghadban as their own choice.

Comment

¶7. (C) The squabbling over positions within the various blocs is not surprising given (a) many of the negotiators

are new to the game of assembling a government and (b) they perceive that their choices now will likely last four years. Our sense is that PM-designate will not reach his self-imposed deadline of May 9 which never seemed realistic anyway given Iraqi political realities. We also sense that step-by-step progress towards assembling Maliki's cabinet is being achieved. Like so much else in Iraq, it often moves more slowly than many would like.

KHALILZAD